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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experiences of seven new faculty at a charter school of education at California State University Los Angeles. The seven new professors in the study were asked to engage in ethnographic interviews that described and categorized their experiences, and contrasted them with other events. Interview questions focused on: descriptions of experiences; mentors in the university; differences between teaching in elementary/high schools and in higher education; challenges of being new professors; and benefits of being in a cohort of new professors. The study found that the responses of the new professors differed considerably. While some found the mentor relationship satisfactory, others did not. Reactions to the usefulness of orientation meetings and a course on university instruction found the former welcoming but the latter not useful. Other factors or experiences which were helpful in acclimatizing to university life included helpful senior faculty, office mates, the division chairperson, key office staff, and being part of the cohort itself. The paper concludes that those experiences that were based on personal connections and two-way communication, rather than formalized institutional events, were most useful in promoting acclimatization to the university setting. (CM)

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THE ACCLIMATION PROCESS OF SEVEN NEW PROFESSORS

by Ann Barbour, Anna Chee, Carolyn Frank,
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(Authorship is alphabetical since the paper was written by all the seven professors around a computer and through email)

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Introduction

In this paper we examine the experiences of new faculty entering a university. During our first year at California State University, Los Angeles, the seven of us participated in a number of events together that were intended to help us in our initiation to our School of Education. We will look at how we were welcomed and invited into projects, how easy it was making connections with other faculty, how much our voices were valued and needed, and what were the positive and negative aspects of the acclimation process. We discovered that although there were similar experiences offered to us as new faculty members, each professor evaluated their usefulness in different ways. When asked to describe the experiences, the new professors listed many events (e.g., advising students, supervising preservice teachers, developing syllabi, teaching courses, creating RTP -retention, tenure, promotion files - portfolios, discovering how a "charter school" differs from a "traditional" school of education, etc.). These events were then categorized by the professors into five categories: description of experiences, mentors in the university, differences between teaching in lower (K-12) or higher education (university), challenges of being new professors, and benefits of the cohort of new professors.

Methodology

The questions asked of each new professor in the study were grounded in an ethnographic framework which explored the cultural understandings of these new professors (Spradley & McCurdy, 1971, 1972). They were asked to engage in ethnographic interviews (Agar, 1980, 1994, Spradley, 1980) to identify their cultural knowledge of being members of the new faculty

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entering the Charter School of Education (CSOE) at Cal State LA. These new faculty members were asked to describe their experiences, to categorize these experiences, and to contrast them with other events. The answers to these questions were analyzed using domain analysis for descriptive questions, taxonomic analysis for the structural questions, and componential analysis for the contrast questions (Spradley, 1979). In other words, as we examined the interviews we made lists of the events, categorized them into different domains, and then compared these events with other events in the university. All the interviews were read by all seven of the professor and the themes were developed from group discussions.

Context of the Study

One of the many difficulties of accessing the culture of our department in our university (the Charter School of Education at California State University, Los Angeles) was that it was a "charter" school. This meant that university faculty had more freedom from university regulations to experiment with new innovations and develop projects that solved educational problems in our community. However, not everyone could explain exactly what it meant to be a "charter school." As in many innovative systems, a narrow definition of the charter would have limited the possibilities of what it could become. The same element that enabled the faculty to work in many new ways to create successful projects was the same element that made it difficult for new faculty to understand how it all worked together. We did not know what a "charter school of education" was and many of the people we asked could not define it for us. Because they were still in the process of forming what it was, they did not yet want to limit it with definitions of what it could be. Because of its fluid nature, it was difficult for the new faculty to understand what it was. The experienced faculty called it "amoebae" but to us it seemed like we were stepping into a "whirlwind of activity." However, because of its fluid nature, when we did come to understand what it was, we began to grasp what possibilities lay ahead for us. As one of the new professors explained in an interview:

"One feeling that has remained throughout this first year is that it is heartening, yet at the same time disorienting how quickly it is possible for things to change in response to current conditions - like credential and program requirements - at a time when I am just trying to learn the ropes. Another is the palpable feeling of possibility within the CSOE. There are so many things going on, and lots of interconnections between/among people, initiatives, and programs. Once again, presenting a challenge in sorting things out, but at the same time exciting opportunities."

(From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

Another of the new faculty members spoke for many of us during the beginning phase of our entrance into the school when she talked about the "charter" status of the CSOE.

"I really cannot make a comparison between a charter school and a non-charter school for I lack experiences in other types of higher-educational settings. (Someone asked me) how I feel now that I am in a charter school. My answer to the query is, I do not know. I do not even know what CSOE means. I do not know how a charter school might be different from those that are not. I asked a senior faculty at the CSOE once during the last school year if she could tell me how the CSOE works or how it is different from universities that are not a charter school. She changed the subject. Perhaps it was too complicated to explain, or it was an insignificant question, the answers to which I should have figured out on my own. If I can find out what it means to be in a charter school, that is, what choices and power are allowed, what the perimeters are around those choices and power, what obstacles may block what we may want to do, I would feel much more empowered."

(From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

Description of Experiences

Orientation to the university included the fall meetings where all the new professors met each other and their mentors. This orientation was one week before the quarter began and included sessions where we were introduced to each other and to the deans and associate deans. We were shown various aspects of our new site and given workshops about the health benefits, the services offered, the different organizations on campus, and the demographics of the students in our university. One new professor stated in an interview:

> We were extremely lucky to have those two days of orientation. We heard from the many program directors of the university who directed us on what goes on in the university. A plus for the orientation was the panel of "second-year" faculty members. During this session, they highlighted their experiences during their first year—what worked and what did not work, how to manage time, how to say no, why a writing day is essential, how to dissociate professional life from personal life, how to maintain one's sanity, etc. They really put effort in coming up with suggestions and relating first-hand experiences to us. I truly appreciated that. (From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

However, another professor commented that, "It was very intensive and overwhelming." The new faculty found that becoming a "professor" was not quite the sensational experience we had hoped for. It was sometimes very stressful to accept so many new responsibilities and pretend that we knew what we were doing. One professor explained it accurately when she said:

> "Most of the experiences I had provided insights into many of the deep norms that exist, particularly in the CSOE. The highlight of experiences that were particularly important for me, as a new faculty member, were student teacher supervision, committee participation, School-as-a-Whole meetings, the faculty

partnership/mentor program, advisement, and the teaching cycle. In particular, the teaching cycle, complete with course and room assignment, developing a syllabus, ordering materials and books, understanding the students, adapting curriculum and instruction, and being formally evaluated by students was stressful and rewarding. In terms of how we were welcomed, invited to participate, and connected with more experienced faculty, the CSOE mentors were assigned to each new faculty member. There was little formal invitation into activities, rather, activities and opportunities were presented, there was a blanket welcome, and we were left to our own devices to figure out which would be best for each of us to be involved with. Some decisions were better than others. I found that when I reached out to different faculty, most of them responded warmly, and were comfortable and forthcoming in providing me insight to specific issues and questions I had. There was little guidance in how to ease into the work of a professor and how to prioritize, and I finished the year with a clear impression that being a university professor was not for sissies."

(From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

Mentors in the Charter School of Education

Each of the new professors was assigned a mentor professor. The purpose of the mentor was to help the "newbies" with questions about their new institution and provide guidance. The mentor met with the new professor both formally and informally and answered questions concerning instruction and other issues in the university. Mentoring also included times when the new professors met with the dean to talk about how professors were paid in the university, how they got tenure, and how they were evaluated. The new professors and their mentors were also given release time in the winter quarter to attend Friday sessions to discuss issues of instruction at the university level. One of the new professors suggested that mentors provided additional perspectives from which to view our new positions. She said:

"About my mentor - she was very supportive and helpful and was out of my field. In some ways I think that was good. I was able to get a different viewpoint on things, such as what our RTP (retention, tenure, promotion) file should look like, what committees require more meetings than others. I might have a different viewpoint if I wasn't receiving support in my field, too, but I was, so all the variety of information left the ultimate decision up to me. (Our students might consider this approach to be confusing - just tell me what you want and I'll do it, rather than these are alternative ways to look at something and you make the decision that makes the most sense to you)."
(From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

The usefulness of the individual Mentor-Mentee relationships for new professors varied with some also seeking additional advise and support from other seasoned faculty. But the "institutionalization" of this support system was reassuring and appreciated by all of us.

Differences in Lower (K-12) and Higher Education

Four of the seven new faculty members had recently received degrees and were new assistant professors. Their experiences with universities had been as teaching assistants, as students, or as adjunct instructors. Coming to the Charter School of Education as full-time, tenure-track professors meant taking on a whole new identity and different responsibilities. Although we were all excited about the new role, many of us were not prepared. One new professor said:

"A third awakening for me was the transfer from a K-12 learning institution to a higher learning institution. In a K-12 environment, the requirements are not the same. Not that I am unfamiliar with post-secondary teaching, it is simply that more are expected of and from you. I must admit that I did underestimate the demands of a university faculty member. However, it was not to the point that I

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was not able to handle these demands. Granted that time is very limited and work keeps you always busy, it is not to the point that you lose control of the situation. You simply learn how to manage your time better and how to allocate time for certain activities."

(From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

Challenges of Being New Professors in the CSOE

Some of the new professors were not assistant professors but entered as associate professors from different universities. For those professors, differences were not so much differences of going from lower to higher education but going from one institution to another. For them, changing identity and adapting to a new university culture were important. One of the Associate Professors said:

"Much of my initial orientation and feelings about being a new faculty member were colored by my previous university experience. Having been a tenure-track faculty member elsewhere, I couldn't help but compare experiences there with things I found here. Both tangibles (creature comforts) and intangibles (positive working relationships, the acceptance and support I felt, the investment in and loyalty of others to the CSOE). Initially the tangibles threw me and made me wonder if I'd made the right decision. It was frustrating, even alarming, not to have a screen or chalk in my classroom, to have to continually borrow an overhead projector, to navigate dirty restrooms. But it wasn't long before I came to primarily associate the intangibles with my new job, and knew I had. The students were, for the most part, very responsive and engaged. Their diverse backgrounds made class sessions interesting and often lively. They also made me look more closely at what and how I was teaching. For example, the first quarter one quiet student who never spoke during class, but often came to me afterwards, questioned whether it was 'wrong' for boys and girls to have typically different

play styles, or wrong to encourage gender-specific behavior. Class discussion had been dominated by students with more 'feminist' perspectives and she'd gotten the impression that I'd agreed with them. After that I took a hard look at unintended messages I was sending and at the different cultural experiences of my students. Other faculty, both old and new, made it a pleasure to come to campus. Everyone was approachable and supportive, and seemed so relaxed and genuine. The morale and camaraderie among seasoned faculty was encouraging. And being part of a large cohort of new folks made it feel like I'd joined a special club."
(From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

Benefits of the Cohort of New Professors

The final category, Benefits of the Cohort of New Professors, concerned forming a collaborative cohort with seven new professors in the Division of Curriculum and Instruction. In this category the professors described parties they attended, lunches with the experienced faculty, and informal gatherings with the new faculty. These events were described as one important way that the professors thought of themselves as a "cohort" and became colleagues who depended on each other for "survival" during this year. Issues such as RTP and supervision were found to be important points of discussion during the informal cohort sessions. One professor wrote:

"The camaraderie of all the new faculty was deeply felt and appreciated by all. With so many of us coming aboard at the same time, I think the experienced faculty gave us much credence without having to 'prove our worth' as is sometimes the case when just one or two are hired. The numbers also helped in giving us voice at meetings - allowing us to ask otherwise 'dumb' questions for the

sake of all of us. I noticed that the new faculty jumped right in to positions requiring a great deal of responsibility."

(From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

Another new faculty member felt that the cohort was also advantageous in helping new professors feel welcomed into the CSOE. He stated:

"I am thankful that I am a part of a big group of new faculty members—a total of 11 for the entire Charter School of Education, 7 of which solely for the Division of Curriculum and Instruction! Being a part of this group meant that adjustment was not really difficult because we already formed a group and supported each other. We became a team and looked after each other. We shared ideas on where to go, how to acquire things, what to do, etc."

(From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

While as a group and individually the new professors felt welcomed and supported in various ways by seasoned faculty, the fact that all of us were green and lacked the same kinds of knowledge about and experience in the CSOE provided our major source of support. Being part of a cohort was reassuring and relieved stresses that might have been more acute had we oriented to our new positions alone. One important and meaningful meeting of this cohort was in the spring of this new year. All of us had to prepare our RTP file for the Dean to be turned in on April 1. We decided to meet as a group and figure out together what this "box" was going to look like. We met in a classroom on a Tuesday, two weeks before the initial evaluation file was due and we all brought our gray or black boxes, mostly empty at this point. By collaborating and giving suggestions to each other, we managed to make the process a little less intimidating.

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Discussion

The new professors had different evaluations of the usefulness of the categorized events for their initiation into the university. For example, when it came to the mentors, in some cases this was a successful arrangement with the new professors stating that the relationship was helpful in acclimating to the university. Some the mentor-mentee relationships became valued friendships as well as means for understanding the culture and mechanisms of the university. In other cases, the mentor-mentee relationships were less useful either on personal or practical levels. Some new professors felt disinclined to initiate contacts because the relationship seemed to be contrived. Others did not find the mentors very helpful in areas that were important to them (e.g., how to advise students).

Other areas of disagreement included the usefulness of the fall orientation meetings and the Friday course on university instruction. Most of the new professors agreed that the fall orientation was "welcoming" and that, because it was a well-planned university-wide event, the university as a whole valued them. Specific aspects of the orientation that were mentioned as the most helpful were those that involved personal and informal discussions (e.g., learning from second-year professors), rather than the formal presentation of information (e.g., services available for faculty and students). The Friday course on university instruction was not mentioned as furthering the acclimation process by any of the new professors. Most agreed that had it been organized at the college level and designed for education faculty, it would have been more helpful in making sense of their experiences as well as aiding their own professional development.

When asked about additional factors or experiences that helped them orient to the cultural and academic life of the university, the new professors mentioned (1) the seasoned faculty within the college, particularly senior faculty members within their own fields with whom they frequently collaborated, (2) office mates, (3) the division chair, (4) key office staff, and (5) the cohort of newly hired professors. Seasoned faculty were generally viewed as supportive and helpful, and in some cases became mentors. New faculty felt senior faculty provided practical information and sound guidance. They also appreciated that they could "bounce" things off of

individual senior faculty members. Office mates, often the most available of other faculty, were likewise used as sounding boards, and, in addition, offered direct, practical assistance (e.g., with computers) when it was needed most. Some new professors found the division chair's "wise counsel" enlightening and reassuring. In addition, personal relationships with key office personnel were viewed by some as helpful in the practical, procedural realm of navigating the university's bureaucratic structures.

While the first four factors were variously viewed as instrumental in the acclimation process, all seven of the new professors valued the benefits of the Cohort of New Professors, where they got together to support each other on an informal basis, as the most important to their successful initiation into the university. Those benefits included, sharing information, support, camaraderie, and a sense of belonging to a group on a personal level and continual basis. Although these individuals' backgrounds are diverse -- they represent different genders, ethnicities, fields of discipline, and experiences within university settings – they all felt their connections with each other and with the group as a whole offered a level of comfort, acceptance, and support over and above any institutional methods designed to acclimate new faculty.

As professors completing their second year at the university, all agree that the acclimation process continues. Increasing responsibilities, involvement in new endeavors, and greater demands on their time require new adjustments. Although knowing how to access information and to whom to go for counsel has gotten easier, becoming a successfully faculty member depends on repeated reorientation. While each individual is currently experiencing, doing, and learning different things on a daily basis, they all continue to rely on the cohort of new professors as their most accessible and useful system of support.

Implications

The first-year experiences of the seven new faculty members in the Charter School of Education at California State University, Los Angeles highlight factors that effectively support newly hired professors. Their situations were unique in being members of a large cohort of seven new professors. However, their experiences imply that the most useful factors in acclimating to a

new university are twofold. First, experiences that are based on personal connections and two-way communications, rather than on formalized institutional events, are the most useful in promoting acclimation to a university. Opportunities to share and communicate (with a cohort, mentors, seasoned faculty, or staff) provide the principal means for developing an understanding of the cultural and academic life of a university and for learning how to do one's job within it. These are more meaningful than more formal events designed to provide information. Second, experiences and events that originate at the level where new faculty members spend their most time are more helpful in the acclimation process than those that originate at other levels. Connections with colleagues within the division and information about division procedures are more useful than college- or university-level connections and events, and likewise, college-level experiences are more useful than university-level experiences. Connections and events that are personally relevant and directly inform one's work-related experience have the greatest potential to positively influence and speed the acclimation process of newly hired professors.

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